

The Confederate Tradition of Richmond

DOUGLAS FREEMAN

RICHMOND WAS A NAME IN 1860; the War Between the States made her a symbol. She had been the home of a few great men; she became the center of a great tradition. Her ways had been the ways of pleasantness; her fame is that of war. With Leyden and Londonberry her stout defence won her a place in history; the success of that defence took on the same moral significance that led men to regard the tricolor on the citadel of Verdun as the symbol of allied victory or defeat in 1916. As long as Richmond defied the foe, the Southern Confederacy never lost hope. When Richmond fell, the Southern cause collapsed.

Strategically it probably was a mistake to move the capital of the Confederate States from Montgomery in May, 1861, and to place it within a hundred miles of the frontier. It was done to recognize the value to the Confederacy of the adhesion of Virginia and to rally the border States to secession; but it would have been better if President Davis, like Frederick the Great, had fixed his capital wherever the course of conflict carried his standard. Had this been done, each of the tidal rivers of the South Atlantic seaboard might in turn have covered the battle-line, as the Tagliamento and the Piave did for Italy after Caporetto, or as the Meuse, the Aisne, and the Marne did for France in 1914. The vigor of the Union offensive might then have been exhausted as the lines of communication were lengthened, and the end might perhaps have been different.

But the decision was made. Congress and the executives moved to Richmond. The Tredegar became the Krupp Works of the Confederacy, and by the spring of 1862, when the first echo of McClellan's guns came in an ominous mutter of hate from the Chickahominy, Richmond already meant so much to the Confederacy that the evacuation of the city, though seriously considered, would have been regarded alike in the North and in the South as the preliminary of ruin. The great battles of 1862 and 1863 made the successful defence of Richmond the great object of Confederate strategy, even to the neglect of Vicksburg and the line of the Tennessee River. The Confederacy was reft in twain because the pride of the Administration made it hold Richmond at any price and to construct here the munition works that should have been placed far to the interior.

Even in the autumn of 1864, when the uncomplaining Lee confessed that Richmond had become a millstone around the neck of the Confederacy, the government was unwilling to face the loss of prestige that would follow the abandonment of the city. When Richmond was at last evacuated, it was too late.

Richmond's greatest Confederate tradition, therefore, is bound up with her long defence against an enemy that was immeasurably superior in man-power and in all the *matériel* of war. No narrative that measures the odds against the South simply by the size of the opposing armies tells half the story. Artillery for field-use and for the fortifications had to be captured, imported through an ever stiffening blockade or manufactured at improvised plants. Virtually all the guns that guarded the rivers of Virginia and Carolina came from the Gosport Navy Yard, which Virginia seized immediately after she seceded. The small-arms machinery that was used at the Richmond arsenal was brought in, in the main, with infinite labor and unregarding haste from Harpers Ferry. There was the direst shortage of powder until the summer of 1862. Harness was almost unprocurable. Hundreds of the horses that hauled the field artillery at Gettysburg were hitched with ragged rope. Not a blanket could be manufactured in the South after the burning of the Crenshaw plant in Richmond. The supply of draught animals was so scant that the Army of Northern Virginia was threatened with immobility by the autumn of 1863. Locomotives could not be replaced. When the military railroad from Danville to Greensboro was constructed, many of the rails used on it came from other lines that had to be wrecked to supply them. The South had never produced as much bacon as it consumed, and after eighteen months of fighting, was forced to reduce the daily ration in the principal armies to four ounces of bacon, with a pint of meal. A hundred instances of like military disadvantages might be cited. All of them contribute to the picture of a people forced to extemporize every essential element of defense and to rely on valor and generalship to resist the odds against them. Rarely was a major battle fought in Virginia that did not find the Confederates hungry on the field of victory and unable, through the exhaustion of the horses and the breakdown of the wagons, to pursue the defeated foe. To understand Richmond's place in Confederate tradition, one must try to recreate not only the army in the field, but the engineers busily directing the servants in throwing up the fortifications of the city, and, behind them, thousands of men and women ceaselessly employing the crudest tools to provide the essentials of war, with defeat certain for the army if the machines broke down or the creaking trains ceased running. It is a tradition of hard work not less than of gallant deeds, a tradition of mechanical ingenuity not less than of military strategy.

Yet it will never be possible to have these undramatic elements in the Confederate background appraised at their rightful valuation. The eyes of posterity will follow the battle flags. The name of Richmond will conjure up the confused pageant of dusty soldiers hurrying through crowded streets, of white-faced men and women standing on the edge of Shockoe Hill and watching the red flash of the far off guns at Cold Harbor a pageant of hurried couriers bringing the news of victory, of ambulance trains rolling slowly down Broad Street or creeping into the station of the Virginia Central at Seventeenth and Broad to unload hundreds of powder-grimed, pale-lipped wounded, still dazed by the roar of battle. Richmond will mean the slow music of the dead march as Jackson's body is borne through the town. It will mean the rumble of caissons on the back streets, gas lights at midnight from the gray house at Twelfth and Clay when the president sat in doubtful council; it will mean the arrival of the "flag-of-truce boat" when frenzied mothers rushed the lines of returned prisoners in the Capitol Square to see if the sons who were reported "missing" at Gettysburg had by miracle of mercy escaped the death hail at the stone wall on Cemetery Ridge. "Starvation parties" where soldiers danced till morning with cotton-frocked beauties and then went back to barracks with only the memory of a smile; St. Paul's Church full of gray coats and women in black, bowing together as Dr. Minnegerode prayed; weddings with tears; gentlewomen keeping vigil by the beds of unknown dying boys in Richmond's thirty five hospitals; long rows of upturned red clay at Hollywood, where scores of dead were interred every night with only a penciled shingle to mark the soldier's grave; band music and muffled drums; prayer and profiteering; stalls with second-hand finery that impoverished families had sacrificed; empty markets and high prices; crowded prisons and furtive spies; gnawing want and angry bread riots; threatened raids and the tocsin sounded nervously from the belltower in the Capitol Square; gambling houses and crowded bar rooms; strutting staff officers and crippled heroes; thronged streets and overflowing homes; anxious refugees and pompous Congressmen; brave hearts fired to desperate adventure; high confidence slowly turned to doubt in the winter of 1864-65; whispers of disaster that passed unchallenged; the hurried packing of archives and the quick departure of trains for Danville; the sullen withdrawal of the garrison; the explosion of the magazines, and the burning of the bridges; and then the funeral pyre of Southern hope lighted in the tobacco warehouses—that will always remain the Confederate tradition of Richmond.

It is not, however, the confused tradition of mass-movement alone. On the contrary, the history of those terrible years gets its color and its romance from personalities. No period of modern history since the Renaissance—not even the French Revolution or the World War pro-

duced so many extraordinary men in a brief four years. It is Richmond's proud distinction that nearly all these great men, with the single exception of General Forrest, were associated with her in some degree while she was the Confederate capital. The greatest of those personalities was that composite of the 150,000 faces and characters which first and last made the private soldier of the Army of Northern Virginia the unique warrior of all the ages. This is not the place to describe him. It would be too long a task to tell of his resourcefulness, his unfailing cheer, his sense of humor, his outlook on life, his devotions and his antipathies, his ability to live on scant rations, his endurance on the march, his democratic discipline, his contempt for cowardice, his ferocity in attack, his inflexibility in the face of adversity. Suffice it to say that the highest monument in Richmond higher even than that of General Lee rightly stands to commemorate him as he appeared in the service of the South. Next to him, of course, stands his great commander, the simple soul and the magnificent mind that came to typify in the eyes of the soldiers the ideal that each man secretly shaped for himself. General Lee's associations with Richmond, though brief, are full and rich. His place in history rises with the years. Although he rarely visited the city, if ever, before the war, and was absent from it for long periods during the course of the struggle, it is not too much to say that whatever is fine and aspiring and unselfish and kindly in the life of Richmond is due to this influence more than to that of any other man who ever lived here. His lieutenants and most of his civil associates were worthy of him. One has only to go to the Valentine Museum and look at the death mask of Stonewall Jackson to realize that under the austerity of the soldier was the spirit of the ascetic.

President Davis was as true a patriot as either of these, without the glory of great victories to soften the final defeat. Tall, erect, with clean-cut, classic features, cursed with ill health, half blind, and handicapped by a singularly-sensitive nature, he bore without a quiver the immense burden of the civil administration. Although his very regard for constitutionalism was held up against him as a vice, when it would have been acclaimed a virtue in another man, he must always be credited with sustaining a struggle that would have ended far sooner without him. If he favored the incompetent Northrop, he sustained the brilliant Gorgas; if he kept Bragg in command when that mistake meant disaster at Lookout Mountain, he likewise retained his faith in Lee after the West Virginia campaign of 1861, and found that faith vindicated.

It is customary to speak of Mr. Davis' cabinet and bureau chiefs as mediocrities, but among them were administrators who would have won distinction in any war men like Quartermaster General A. R. Lawton, General I. M. St. John, of the Mining and Nitre Bureau, the matchless

Gorgas, who has already been mentioned, and the indefatigable Seddon who was incomparably a better Secretary of War than Stanton could ever have been. A portrait gallery of contrasting countenances but common patriotism might be brought together of men like Dr. Bledsoe, Judge J. A. Campbell, General Preston, of the Bureau of Conscription, and a score almost as interesting.

The naval group gave color to the capital—Mallory, Maury, Porter, Davidson, Mitchell, Forrest, Sidney Smith Lee, brother of the general, Semmes, after the loss of the *Alabama*; not to mention Tatnall and Buchanan and those whose duty kept them on the coast. No similar company of naval experts ever made greater contribution to war in as brief a time or under conditions as adverse.

As for the cavalymen, where was their like? "Jeb" Stuart was the ideal of thousands of young troopers—theatrical, delighting in display, with an unconquerable fondness for sweeping raids, yet a moralist at heart and invincibility correct in his conduct. His staff lighted many a Richmond party with their gray uniforms and their yellow facings—Heros von Borcke, the von Steuben of the South, Norrnan FitzHugh, John Esten Cooke, H. B. McClellan, all of them interesting men. Among the brigade and divisional commanders of the cavalry, was there not Wade Hampton? Did not Fitz Lee and his cousin, "Rooney," and "Grumbler" Jones and Rosser and Butler and Robertson and Wickham ride through Richmond streets with rattling sabres?

These are but a few of the personalities that live in Richmond memory seventy years after Joseph E. Johnston marched down from Manassas, and Evans and Lawton came up from the Southern coast for the first great struggle around Richmond. Every name brings up a picture; every career has its inspiration. One finds it difficult to break off when the mention of one leader suggests compeers as valiant and devoted. Surely none can walk the old streets they trod, or read their letters or gaze on their relics in the Confederate Museum and not feel grateful that in that high tradition the humblest son of Richmond can spiritually keep the company of kings.

The above relatively unknown essay by Dr. Douglas Freeman was published in 1932 in The Richmond Magazine. It was written for a special issue printed as a souvenir of the last great reunion of the Confederate veterans.